

By MICHAEL KNOX: Wycombe Wanderers 1, Sutton Utd 1

A SPLIT second decision by the referee probably cost Wycombe Wanderers victory in their Isthmian League Premier Division match against Sutton United at a very wet Loakes Park on Friday night.

The score stood at 1-1 just before half-time when Wycombe full-back Bobby Davies started a move on the left. He linked with Mick Holifield whose dangerous cross caused problems to the Sutton defence.

The ball fell conveniently for Derek Harris who shot for goal. But before it could enter the net referee Mr Maber, who must have had one eye on the play and the other on his stop watch, blew his whistle for half-time.

Harris' shot did indeed cross the goalline but of course did not count. It is this sort of fortune that has dogged Wanderers in recent weeks at a time when they need all the luck they can get. One cannot criticise Mr Maber in any way for his decision but it must have been hard to take for the Blues' players, especially Harris.

That decision might well cost Wycombe £300 at the end of the season. That's the prize for finishing third. They needed a victory to ensure themselves of the money but must now win at Barking on Saturday to stay ahead of Tooting, who did Blues a favour by losing 3-2 at home to Walthamstow Avenue on Thursday.

Wycombe, of course, had a chance to convert their superiority into goals in the second half but by that time conditions had made the result a lottery. Torrential rain before the match made a postponement a strong possibility.

But with the season drawing to a close, it was decided to go ahead. In the first half the pitch proved quite playable but as the rain continued to fall, it became a muddy morass, particularly down the middle.

It was puzzling why neither team made greater use of the wings, which were

still quite green through under-use. I suppose a draw was just about a fair result in the conditions, although Wycombe will rue the fact that they have now taken only four points out of 15 in five successive home games, scoring three goals in the process.

Nevertheless, it was a good result for four ex-Wycombe players — Sutton manager Keith Blunt and three of his team John Delaney, Larry Pritchard and Gavin Fraser. They appeared quite happy to claim a draw in their last league game of the season, which leaves them with 65 points from 42 games and a probable place in the top six.

Delaney, as was his wont in his long stint at Loakes Park, won most of the high balls while the unassuming Larry Pritchard had a quiet game but still had a hand in Sutton's goal. Fraser appears to be developing into an excellent player and a fierce competitor.

Both sides had clear chances of taking the lead in the first 15 minutes. First Dylan Evans saw a gentle header saved by the 'keeper, while at the other end Fraser should have made more of an opening after the tricky Norman Milne had rounded Alan Phillips but John Maskell was equal to Fraser's shot.

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But then in the 19th Blues went ahead. John Priestley, who seems to revel in the muddy conditions, threaded a left footed pass through to Mick Holifield on the edge of the area. Holifield timed his run to perfection and shot home from 10 yards.

Wycombe looked good at this stage and could well have gone further ahead seven minutes later when Sutton 'keeper Dave

Collyer, well remembered at Loakes Park for his great feats for Woking, excelled by tipping a strong Bobby Davies header over the bar.

In recent weeks Wanderers have made a habit of missing great chances after taking the lead and then conceding a goal at the other end — and it happened again on Friday night.

Defender Richard Strong, who otherwise produced his best performance yet in a Blues' vest, pulled Ricky Kidd's shirt just outside the left edge of the penalty area. Pritchard's teasing free-kick with a slippery ball was dropped by Maskell at the feet of Micky Joyce who tapped in the equaliser from five yards out.

Shortly afterwards Kidd was fouled again, this time by Priestley on the right side of the field. Again Pritchard took the kick, but this time Delaney's diving header was brilliantly taken at full stretch by Maskell.

Milne, the most dangerous forward on the night, saw his shot deflected only six inches wide of the target but it was Wycombe who would have been ahead at half-time but for that final whistle. Indeed, I believe some fans thought Blues were leading at the interval anyway.

The second half was dominated by the conditions although Paul Birdseye's exciting run and 20 yard shot which brought the best out of Collyer, was probably the high point of the whole match.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell, P. Birdseye, R. Davies, R. Strong, A. Phillips, J. Priestley, G. Mackenzie, M. Holifield, D. Harris, D. Evans, A. Horseman (sub H. Kennedy 66 mins).

SUTTON: D. Collyer, P. McKinnon, K. Walden, J. Rains, J. Delaney, M. Stephens (sub P. Mills 69 mins), G. Fraser, L. Pritchard, R. Kidd, M. Joyce, N. Milne.

Referee: T. Maber (Ruislip).

Half-time: 1-1. **Scorers:** Wycombe — Holifield (19 mins); Sutton — M. Joyce (32).